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Writing Terror

Like a unicorn, the colossal rose-colored stone that now stands in front of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Roskilde looks like the stuff of fantasy. I am not the only one to halt. All around me people seem to move towards it as if to feel that it is real. It takes me a while to realize that the enormous rose quartz crystal is part of Peter Voss-Knude's exhibition project "The Anti-Terror Album". The exhibition title transports this magic token of fairytale into another imaginative realm: the world of terror or, more precisely, of terror prevention.

Voss-Knude's *1.1 Tonnes Rose Quartz Terror Barricade* (2019) breaks the tradition for masking defense architecture as discrete ornaments or functional carriers of trees or flowers to avoid reminding the public of their preemptive function against terror. Unlike the thousands of other stones which stand as tokens of protection on squares or in front of public buildings to hinder potential terror attacks, this rosy charm does not seek to hide its presence. Its candy-floss aesthetic pulls people in, making me stop, touch, and wonder.

Rose quartz crystals is a "stone for the love junkies and hopeless romantics", I read on the website of a popular crystal healing store. The stone is known across the globe for its "unique healing properties". With *1.1 Tonnes Rose Quartz Terror Barricade* Voss-Knude inserts a massive sign of love and healing into the global grammar of terror prevention. But it is difficult to know how to best approach this collision of functions and symbols: Is this a healing stone operationalized in the service of terror prevention? Or a terror prevention instrument reconfigured as a healing device? The rose crystal is not only a stumbling block for the subdued operations of the anti-terror machinery, it is also a queer object which refuses to fit in. Like a drag queen, its flamboyant aesthetic is its gate-way to the political: This isn't a parody of terror prevention as much as a glimmering examination of the underlying ideas of what protection might mean in Western (in)security states today.

Dictionaries typically define terror as "the state of being terrified or extremely frightened". Followingly, terrorism is often described as "unofficial" or "unauthorized" use of violence and fear in the pursuit of political aims. The war on terror is a war that weaponizes affects and feelings. The proper targets of terror are, after all, not the casualties of an attack but those who watch and witness – and can get terrified. Similarly, the fight against terror is not (only) about stopping or preventing terrorists, but about making people feel safe. This is no easy task. Not only because of the shifting forms and strategies of terror, but

also due to how anti-terror machinery increasingly seems to interfere with fundamental democratic processes and ideas of human rights. Who are able to feel safe by the proliferation of security, surveillance, and control mechanisms that keep transforming our physical and mental landscape in this indefinite war on terror?

You don't need to listen to many minutes of the record *The Anti-Terror Album* (2019), that Voss-Knude has produced for his exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Roskilde, to get the gist of what he might reply to this question. The first track of the album, with the telling title "A RACIST NATION", calls us to examine the anti-terror system's complicity in creating and spreading fear, hate, and stereotypes. The song spells out the importance of intervening and "STUDYING MORE / READING MORE / AND UNDERSTANDING MORE". The album – as well as the exhibition – is both the result of such a study, and an invitation to join in on this task.

The Anti-Terror Album is made in "response to the national terror exercise *KRISØV17*", as it says on the cover of the record. "KRISØV" is the name of the large-scale national crisis management exercises that the Danish Emergency Management Agency and the National Police of Denmark has organized biannually since 2003. The exercises are intended to train and test the authorities' abilities to respond to unexpected crises, such as terror attacks, with special emphasis on coordination, cooperation, information and press work. *KRISØV17* included close to a thousand people from more than thirty state departments, state agencies, public institutions, and private companies who for two full days in September 2017 were engaged in a simulation exercise reacting to a series of fictive terror attacks taking place in Northern Jutland by a group of Islamist terrorists. The story-board for the exercise was written by the Danish crime author and crisis management researcher Rasmus Dahlberg, who since 2015 has been commissioned to write realistic background narratives for the simulations. For *KRISØV17*, Dahlberg's story-board centered on two fictive terror attacks taking place in the course of the exercise: An Islamist terrorist drives a van into the crowd attending the unveiling of a public sculpture outside Skagen Art Museum, killing eight persons. The following day an Islamist terrorist group attacks a congress center in Aalborg taken seventy people hostages.

Following Voss-Knude's long-term strategy of getting involved with institutions he takes issues with, the artist approached the Danish Emergency Management Agency and got hold of the story-board for *KRISØV17*. For the exhibition in Roskilde, Voss-Knude has made the script for the terror exercise available to read as a booklet. With the music of *The Anti-Terror Album* filling the rooms of the museum, Voss-Knude uses the exhibition as a framework for examining the form and content of the narrative, as

well as its conditions of production and performative effects. The narrative reads like a film script, clipping between scenes that give insights into the actions, thoughts, and feelings of the people who are imagined to be entangled in these incidents – from the terrorists themselves to journalists, the police, soldiers, and different witnesses. It does not take many pages before one comes across Dahlberg's fondness for sexualized and Orientalized descriptions of the male Islamist terrorists, especially the character "Bukran", whose naked body the author describes in great detail in the script.

Beside the booklet, Voss-Knude also presents different objects that give further context to the narrative of *KRISØV17*, such as a photogravure of Dahlberg's contract with the Danish Emergency Management Agency that details his commission of writing an approximately 60-page story-board for an honorarium of 30.000 DKK. Pinned to the museum wall is also a watercolor of the cover of a criminal novel published by Rasmus Dahlberg, *Dødens droner - en sag for Pandoracellen* (2018). The book itself is also present in the exhibition. On closer inspection one sees that it is an extended version of the script for *KRISØV17* that Dahlberg have gotten permission from the Danish Emergency Management Agency to rewrite and re-publish as a crime thriller. The second in a series, which started with his re-edited script of *KRISØV15* two years prior. Another eye-catching element in the museum is a large-scale charcoal drawing of a poster image of the popular war-on-terror TV-series *Homeland*, where the bright white face of the show's main protagonist, CIA intelligence officer Carrie Mathison (played by Claire Danes) is surrounded by numerous women in dark burkas.

Voss-Knude's inclusion of a reference to *Homeland* is telling. Firstly, the narrative of *KRISØV17* is clearly influenced by the dramaturgical strategies and ideological framing of this series, which have been heavily criticized for its stereotypical representations of Muslims, and its problematic conflation of Islam, Islamism and terrorism. Secondly, Voss-Knude's exposition of how Dahlberg's crime novel has been partly funded by Danish Emergency Management Agency suggest a parallel to how a series like *Homeland* are enmeshed in what has been called "the military-entertainment complex". This term describes the long tradition for intimate collaborations between military institutions and the movie and game industries, for instance in the US, where the US Department of Defense often works closely with Hollywood in the making of films and series on war and terror. Voss-Knude's juxtaposition of *Homeland* and *KRISØV17* questions the instrumentalization of art and entertainment in the war on terror: What ideological work is performed by the numerous TV-series and crime novels that keep reproducing the same dangerously simplified story-lines centered on Muslims-as-terrorists? And, perhaps more importantly, what are the political and material effects of letting a crime novelist, with a flair for

Hollywood's reductive and racist terror stories, set the stage for how Danish state institutions train their employees to recognize, respond to, and prevent terror?

With *The Anti-Terror Album* Voss-Knude seeks to expose the normalization of Islamophobia in the Danish anti-terror prevention industry. The choice of a pop-album as the medium for this exposure indicates a desire for reaching diverse audiences beside academic and artistic circles. The activist thrust is evident in the way he addresses the listener head on, as in "Nasty Fruit (Wake You Up)", which centers on the need "TO ACKNOWLEDGE / TO FIGHT / TO CHANGE". But the song also holds an acute awareness of how difficult it can be to make people care about these issues:

AND WHEN YOU TELL ME
THAT THIS RACIST STORY IS NOT IMPORTANT TO SEE
ALL I CAN THINK OF
IS HOW DO I ENGAGE WITH THIS TOTAL APATHY

With *The Anti-Terror Album* Voss-Knude has orchestrated an impressive refusal of the "SILENT ACCEPTANCE" of the racist and nationalist politics of protection and security that surround us today. If rage and indignation are central motors in this intervention in the affective politics of the war on terror, the project is not limited to the register of critique and refusal. Like the healing power that radiates from the *1.1 Tonnes Rose Quartz Terror Barricade*, Voss-Knude's *The Anti-Terror Album* also gestures towards utopian modes of living and feeling beyond fear, oppression, and injustice. Such romantic glimmers of hope are needed in order to keep the political depression at bay, and to find energy to rewrite and refuse the racist narratives that the State supports and produce to supposedly keep (some of) us safe. With *The Anti-Terror Album* Voss-Knude offers a counter-narrative that urges us to imagine and strive for a different present and future. Or as the final lines of the song "SAFETY IS THE CHILD OF TERROR" so succinctly puts it:

ONE DAY
I'LL RESIST
ONE DAY

I'LL DANCE

IT ALL AWAY